

## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

### Author: Rick Bragg

Born c. 1959, in Possum Trot, AL; son of Margaret Marie Bragg. Education: Harvard University.  
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**Name:** Rick Bragg  
**Born:** 1959  
**Education:** Harvard University  
**Address:**  
University of Alabama,  
402-B Phifer Hall,  
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487



### Career:

Journalist and memoirist. Worked as reporter for various Alabama newspapers; worked as a reporter for *St. Petersburg Times*, St. Petersburg, FL, and *New York Times*, New York, NY.

### Awards:

Nieman fellowship, Harvard University; Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, 1996, for coverage of Oklahoma City bombing; American Society of Newspaper Editors Distinguished Writing Award (twice); University of Alabama Clarence Cason Award for Nonfiction Writing, 2004.

### Writings:

*All Over but the Shoutin'*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1997, published as *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, Harville Press (London, England), 1999.  
(With Walker Evans) *Wooden Churches: A Celebration*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1999.  
*Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg*, University of Alabama Press (Tuscaloosa, AL), 2000.  
*Ava's Man*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2001.  
(Author of foreword) *Best of the Oxford American: Ten Years from the Southern Magazine of Good Writing*, Hill Street Press (Athens, GA), 2002.  
*I Am a Soldier Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2003.  
*The Prince of Frogtown*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2008.

### Media Adaptations:

*Ava's Man* was recorded on compact disc and released by Random Audio, 2001. *All Over but the Shoutin'* was narrated by Bragg and released as an audiobook produced by Random Audio, 1997.

### Sidelights:

In his acclaimed memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, Rick Bragg describes his personal journey from harsh childhood to national renown as a prize-winning journalist. A reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, Bragg pays special homage in his memoir to his mother, Margaret, for her heroic efforts to provide her children a good home despite nearly insurmountable hardships.

Bragg grew up in Possum Trot, Alabama, located in the Appalachian foothills on the border between Alabama and Georgia. He was the second of three sons, a fourth having died in infancy. The family was very poor,



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surviving on a fifty-dollar-per-month Social Security check in addition to what Margaret Bragg made as a field hand. Bragg's father, a Korean War veteran who became a physically abusive alcoholic and died at age forty, was rarely present; when he was, he often beat Margaret. She withstood mistreatment stoically and bestowed a compensating love on her children, which enabled Bragg to find eventual success as a writer. All in all, his childhood, Bragg wrote in *All Over but the Shoutin'*, was "full, rich, original and real," as well as "harsh, hard, mean as a damn snake." "I am not a romantic figure," he added, "...but I have not led a humdrum life."

After graduating from high school, Bragg spent six months in college, then landed a job at a local newspaper after the paper's first choice for the job opening decided to remain in a fast-food restaurant position instead. After moving on to the *St. Petersburg Times*, Bragg covered Hurricane Andrew, problems in Haiti, and riots in Miami before spending a year at Harvard University on a Nieman fellowship. Subsequently, he joined the *New York Times*, covering the Susan Smith child murders and the U.S. intervention in Haiti.

In 1996 Bragg's coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing earned him the Pulitzer Prize. He brought his mother to New York City by plane for the awards ceremony; she had not only never been on a plane, or on an escalator, or in New York, but she had not bought a new dress in eighteen years. Bragg describes the prize ceremony in *All Over but the Shoutin'* and the scene is, according to Diane Hartman in the *Denver Post*, "the best in the book." Bragg also memorably recounts his cash purchase, with his prize money and book profits, of a new house for his mother. *Seattle Times* contributor Chris Solomon concluded that *All Over but the Shoutin'* is a "well-received effort to enshrine a saint (his mother), exorcise a demon (his father) and tell his own Horatio Alger story."

Many reviewers have praised Bragg's gripping real-life story, though the enthusiasm has been tempered by some of the story's psychological residue. For Hartman a maudlin tone, born of "survivor's guilt," enters the writing at points—"but Bragg is good and there's no denying it," she concluded. A writer for *Library Journal* recommended *All Over but the Shoutin'* highly for its "honest but unsentimental" style, its "plainspoken and lyrical" effects, and its "telling" details. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor, however, called the book "uneven" and "jolting," referring to it as "a mixture of moving anecdotes and almost masochistic self-analysis" but nonetheless praising Bragg's "gift for language." Similar admiration was expressed by *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Charles McNair, who considered the memoir a "heartbreaking, inspiring account" that "is no sentimental, soft-lens nostalgic piece, but an uncomfortably honest portrait of growing up with less than nothing, a memoir fraught with sharp edges and hard truths."

Bragg's prequel to *All Over but the Shoutin'*, titled *Ava's Man*, is, as he told *Book* writer Anthony DeCurtis, a "necessary response to his readers' righteous demands" after reading *All Over but the Shoutin'*. In this book he tells the story of his maternal grandparents, Ava and Charlie Bundrum. Because he knew few details about the lives of his grandparents, he had to reconstruct the story from an oral history he collected from his mother, aunts and uncles, and other family members and friends. These friends and relatives had rich tales to tell about Charlie Bundrum, a man who was much loved and admired. Bragg had never met his grandfather, as he died the year before Bragg's birth, but he did rely on his own recollections of his grandmother Ava, who lived on thirty-six years after her husband's death.

Charlie Bundrum raised his family in the Deep South during the heart of the economic depression of the 1930s, and moved his wife and eight children twenty-one times, determined to do whatever it took to keep his family fed and safe. Bundrum worked as a roofer and general laborer, as well as a bootlegger, for most of his life. While he developed a taste for the illegal corn liquor, which eventually killed him at a young age, he never let alcohol run his life. Bragg depicts his grandfather, in DeCurtis's words, as "a moonshine maker who worked hard and fiercely protected his family; loved to fight, fish, and tell stories, and cared little for any law but the unspoken, unquestioned code of his community." At one point in Bragg's story, Bundrum gets arrested for vagrancy, based on his appearance, while trying to get home from a fishing trip. This was not an uncommon experience for poor



## Author: Rick Bragg (3)

white men living in Appalachia during the 1940s. Anthony Day in the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out that Bragg is one of the first authors to tell the story of poor whites in the south from an insider's perspective, and noted that Bragg writes "honestly and affectionately" regarding this topic. Robert Morgan, in the *New York Times Book Review*, acknowledged that "relatively few authors have truly caught the voice of the Southern working class," and in *Ava's Man* the characters and setting "grab you from the first sentence." Morgan went on to call *Ava's Man* "a kind of sublime testimonial" and added: "Bragg gets the combination of sentiment and independence and fear in this culture just right."

For Bragg, writing *Ava's Man* was an opportunity to acquaint himself with the grandfather he never knew and to build a monument to this beloved man. Though *Orlando Sentinel* writer John Harper found the book "structurally weak," a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* reported that "Bragg delivers, with deep affection, fierce familial pride, and keen, vivid prose."

In 2003 Bragg was selected by Knopf to write the story of one of the first women to be injured in active duty while serving in the U.S. military. Discussing *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story* with *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Charlotte Abbot, Bragg noted that the appeal of writing the book lay primarily in the "wonderful story" Lynch, a soldier fighting in the War on Terror in Iraq, has to tell. "What happened was unexpected: a nineteen-year-old supply clerk was pressed into driving a truck into a war. It was an unscripted drama. Some people died, others got broken. But at least where Jessie is concerned there's a win. I've written so many stories where there wasn't a win...Jessie wanted to see what was 'on the other side of the holler.' These are people who fight and die and serve their country, and they deserve some good attention, something beyond the sneers of intellectuals."

## Further Readings:

### Periodicals:

*Book*, September, 2001, Anthony DeCurtis, "Southern Grit," p. 53.

*Booklist*, September 15, 1997, p. 182; June 1, 2001, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 1795.

*Denver Post*, October 5, 1997, Diane Hartman, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*.

*Entertainment Weekly*, November 21, 2003, Tina Jordan, review of *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, p. 88.

*Geographical*, September, 1999, Chris Martin, review of *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, p. 71.

*Kliatt*, January, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 23.

*Library Journal*, September 15, 1997, p. 81; January 5, 1998; September 1, 1999, Russell T. Clement, review of *Wooden Churches: A Celebration*, p. 186; November 15, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 115; May 1, 2000, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg*, p. 128; June 15, 2001, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 81; September 1, 2001, Pam Kingsbury, "Building Himself a Grandfather," p. 194.

*Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2001, Anthony Day, "An Affectionate Portrait of the South's Poor, Hard-Living Whites," p. E3.

*Mississippi Quarterly*, winter, 1999, Amy E. Weldon, "When Fantasy Meant Survival," p. 89.

*New York Times*, September 10, 2001, Theodore Rosengarten, "Hammer-Swinging Roofer, Not a Hillbilly, in Appalachia," p. E6.

*New York Times Book Review*, June 25, 2000, Ruth Bayard Smith, review of *Somebody Told Me*; September 2, 2001, Robert Morgan, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 9.

*Orlando Sentinel*, September 19, 2001, John Harper, review of *Ava's Man*.

*Publishers Weekly*, July 14, 1997, p. 73; August 6, 2001, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 74; September 8, 2003, Charlotte Abbot, "Bragg: Lynch Has a 'Wonderful Story to Tell,'" p. 16.

*Rapport*, May, 1999, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*, p. 39.



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*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 16, 2001, review of *Ava's Man*, p. 68.

*Sarasota Herald Tribune*, November 5, 2000, Thomas Becnel, "Bragg Shares What Somebody Told Me," p. E5;

November 4, 2001, Susan L. Rife, "Bragg's Portrait of Grandfather Is Revealing and Very Human," p. E5.

*Seattle Times*, October 30, 1997, Chris Solomon, review of *All Over but the Shoutin'*.

*Times Literary Supplement*, October 16, 1998, Charles McNair, "The Struggle So Far," p. 34.

*Washington Post*, August 19, 2001, Fred Chappell, "Hardscrabble," p. T4.\*

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### Reviews:

#### From *School Library Journal*

On Palm Sunday, 1994, a tornado ripped through a church in Piedmont, AL, killing 20 people. This is Bragg's hometown, and he began his story on the tragedy for the *New York Times* as follows: "This is a place where grandmothers hold babies on their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in the sky are holes in the floor of heaven. This is a place where the song 'Jesus Loves Me' has rocked generations to sleep, and heaven is not a concept, but a destination." It is writing of this quality that won the author his job as a national correspondent and the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. He grew up in poverty, the second of three sons of an alcoholic, abusive father and a loving mother. The early chapters give a beautiful description of warm and happy moments he enjoyed with her and his family even as she struggled to provide for them after they'd been abandoned. Teens will enjoy reading about the resourceful, talented, and lucky young man's career as he moved from local reporter to working for regional and national papers. A book for students with an interest in writing, journalism, or the South and of use for autobiography assignments—Patricia Noonan, Prince William Public Library, VA

#### From *Library Journal*

When Bragg won the Pulitzer Prize in 1996 he decided to take a long look at his life. He never forgot his mother's many sacrifices to protect and provide for her three sons against the backdrop of a dirt-poor Southern existence with a drunken, abusive father who came and went from their lives. It was she who always managed to keep them fed, clothed, and with a roof over their heads—true, food was simple and slim; clothes were usually thrift store purchases; and the roof was their grandma's—but they survived. The first part of the story is primarily about Bragg's mother and her daily grind picking cotton and taking in laundry. The second half of this memoir tells about the author's life as a journalist—his rise from local town paper to Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship and finally working for the *New York Times*. For anyone who's had a hard life, this story will offer both inspiration and validation. Bragg's strong voice reminds us that one's past and background leave an indelible mark on each of us whether we want to acknowledge that or not. Frank Muller's narration is nothing short of magical; he captures the Southern twang and imbues it with a rich emotion that will move the listener to tears many times over. Highly recommended for all public libraries and literature collections.—Gloria Maxwell, Penn Valley Community Coll., Kansas City, MO

#### From *The New York Times Book Review*

Anthony Walton

In his sad, beautiful, funny and moving memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, Rick Bragg gives us a report from the forgotten heart of "white trash" America...Bragg is showing us a place we have not seen before, not quite like this. And he is joining an elite group of American writers who have used the literature of childhood to affect our understanding of our society, standing in the tradition of Huck and Tom, Holden Caulfield and Dorothy Allison's *Bone Boatwright*...

#### From *Kirkus Reviews*

A celebrated Pulitzer Prizewinning *New York Times* reporter turns his investigative attention to his own past: growing up poor and making his way from rural Alabama to the top of his profession. Bragg, who was born in 1959, is poetic and convincing on his family's poverty and how it chipped away at their dreams "to the point that the hopelessness show[ed] through." His father, violent and an alcoholic, figures here, as do his siblings, but this is above all a son's story of love and respect for a mother who picked cotton, cleaned houses, and took in washing and ironing, determined to secure for her children the chance at a successful life that poverty had



## Reading Group Guide (2)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

### Reviews: (continued)

denied her. Bragg explores the ambivalence he felt about leaving home and his growing awareness that such choices will allow him to achieve at a level he's scarcely imagined. His labors lead eventually to a job at the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, and then to Harvard in 1992, when he receives a Nieman Fellowship that allows him to make up in reading and coursework some of what he'd missed by having left college early. Bragg won his Pulitzer in 1996 for his human interest stories, profiles of such figures as a courageous bodega owner, defying robbers, and of the 87-year-old Mississippi washerwoman who donated her life savings to a university. He realizes a long-cherished plan when he has enough money to buy a home for his mother. Says Bragg, "you do the best you can for the people...you love with all the strength in your body, once you finally figure out that they are who you are, and, in many ways, all there is." Bragg, who now lives in Atlanta, has a strong voice and a sweeping style that, like his approach to newspaper writing, is rich, empathetic, and compelling. His memoir is a model of humility combined with pride in one's accomplishments.



## Guide from Bookbrowse.com

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

### Discussion Guide:

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'*, a haunting memoir about growing up dirt-poor in the deep South, and about struggling to leave the past behind while still deeply tied to it through bonds of love and responsibility.

Rick Bragg was born in the pinewoods of Alabama to a mean-tempered, hard-drinking father and a strong-willed, loving mother, who struggled to protect her sons from the effects of poverty and ignorance that had constricted her own life. After years of abusing his wife and children, Charles Bragg abandoned the family when Rick was six. Margaret Bragg moved her three sons into her parents' house, going eighteen years without a new dress so that her children could have school clothes and working in the cotton fields so that they wouldn't have to live on welfare alone. Brash and wild like his father, Rick graduated from high school, seemingly destined for either the cotton mills or the penitentiary. Instead, he signed up for a journalism class at a nearby college and before long was offered a job as a sportswriter for the local paper. From there, he moved from small papers in northeast Alabama to *The St. Petersburg Times* and eventually became a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for *The New York Times*.

*All Over but the Shoutin'* is the moving account of one man's determination to rewrite his family history and to carve out a life for himself based on the strength of his mother's encouragement and belief. Written with refreshing honesty and marvelous humor, it paints an unforgettable picture of the love and suffering that lie at the heart of every family.

### For Discussion:

Why does Bragg begin his memoir with the image of redbirds fighting? Why do you think he includes the story of a bird attacking its own image in the mirror?

In the prologue, Bragg claims several times that "this is not an important book." Does he convince us that in fact it is important? If so, how? Why does he feel that he "cannot take the chance of squandering the knowledge and the stories that [my mother] and my people hold inside them" [p. xvi]?

Bragg describes a memory of himself on a gunny sack that his mother is pulling through a cotton field as she works; at three, he "rides the back of the six-foot-long sack like a magic carpet" [p. 23]. How does this particular image sum up his mother's love for him? Is his mother's devotion to her sons' welfare out of the ordinary?

Does Bragg regret his inability to forgive his dying father? Would reconciliation have alleviated Bragg's need to compensate his mother for his father's failures? What is the significance of the gift of books by an illiterate father to his clever son?

Although many aspects of his family's life were ruled by poverty, Bragg was immersed in the traditions of the pinewoods, where self-reliant people were adept at music, building, and handcrafts, where "likker and religion flowed together" [p. 34]. Are certain elements of the life he describes enviable? Do you get the impression that his memories of childhood are colored by nostalgia? To what extent do you think nostalgia plays a role in the memories and experiences of everyone?



## Guide from Bookbrowse.com (2)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

While many African-Americans—from Frederick Douglass to Maya Angelou—have given us their stories of growing up poor and black, the segment of society disparagingly called “poor white trash” has produced relatively few writers. Does this book change your view of the large segment of whites who live in rural poverty?

Although Bragg sees his background as a handicap in his profession, the unmistakably Southern way he uses the English language can be part of the appeal of his writing. One editor warned him about exploiting his gift to produce “too many pretty lines” [p. 228]. Do you agree that this is a danger for Bragg? What do you notice about his style, imagery, humor, and approach to news stories that is distinctive?

Did luck make the difference between Rick Bragg’s life and the lives of his two brothers? Or do their different choices have more to do with temperament and character than with the hazards of fortune? Do you see Rick Bragg as a man who is more determined and driven than he admits? Why does he insist on attributing his success to luck?

Race relations, as Bragg shows, are complicated for poor whites in the South. What do you learn from the story of the black family down the road bringing food to Rick’s mother? From his family’s devotion to the demagogue George Wallace? From his work in Haiti?

Why is Bragg particularly drawn to stories about “living and dying and the trembling membrane in between” [p. 139]? Why is he so good at writing about violence and tragedy? What is it about journalism that most disturbs him?

Has Bragg’s attempt to compensate for his mother’s unhappy life contributed to his inability to settle down with someone? Is his avoidance of intimacy a legacy from his father or is it simply the syndrome of a successful and driven man who doesn’t have time to attend to the emotional side of life?

Despite the revolution in American life that was brought about by the women’s movement, the culture of the South is well known for its lingering devotion to ideals of chivalry. Does Rick Bragg raise his mother onto a pedestal? Does he risk turning her into a passive heroine who depends upon his help?

What, if any, are the definitive class barriers in our society? Does having been born poor mean that a person will always feel inferior to those who weren’t? Do financial or professional achievements raise a person’s “class” level? Is Bragg justified in his resentment of those who seem sophisticated or “elite” to him—the wealthy people of the South or people he meets at Harvard and at *The New York Times*?

Bragg’s response to the Susan Smith case is particularly interesting. What does he identify with in her? Why is he so scornful of her?

What aspect of Bragg’s youth was most damaging to his sense of himself? Is it possible for him to “belong” anywhere? Can winning the Pulitzer Prize make him an insider in the profession of journalism? Is the rootless life of a journalist appropriate for him?

With his urgent desire to make up his mother’s losses, Bragg struggles between his impulse to “rewrite history so late in the volume of our lives” [p. 272] and the more realistic, if discouraging, realization that “you can’t fix everything” [p. 312]. Is he sacrificing himself for his mother? Or is he what he does more for his own sake than hers?





## Guide from Bookbrowse.com (3)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Why does Bragg address one of the final chapters of his book to his father? How accurate is he in saying to his father, "I am just like you" [p. 318]? What has he learned in the process of writing this memoir? Why is his honesty so moving?

### Suggestions for Further Reading:

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*  
Dorothy Allison, *Trash, Bastard Out of Carolina*  
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
Russell Baker, *Growing Up*  
Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*  
Carolyn Chute, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*  
Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain, When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*  
Harry Crews, *A Childhood*  
Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*  
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*  
Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster* and *A Virtuous Woman*  
James McBride, *The Color of Water*  
Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy*  
Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*  
Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*  
Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*  
Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Story*  
Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

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## Interview with Rick Bragg

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

### Interview with Rick Bragg from *The Writer*

By: Elfrieda Abbe

WRITING ABOUT our family is a tricky endeavor. You constantly work under the shadow of a question that won't go away: Why would anyone outside my relatives and friends be interested in my life? With each word, you seek the courage to continue and the faith in yourself to tell a good story that will keep readers absorbed. Writers of family histories and memoirs will find inspiration and instruction in Rick Bragg's beautifully written bestseller *All Over but the Shoutin'*, about his journey from a poverty-ridden childhood to Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* reporter, and *Ava's Man*, the biography of his grandfather Charlie Bundrum, a man he never knew.

Bragg writes with emotional honesty, humor and compassion. In *All Over but the Shoutin'* he pays tribute to his mother, Margaret Bragg, who toiled in the cotton fields so her sons could have a better life. *Ava's Man* is a celebration of a man who was so beloved his kin couldn't bear to talk about him after he died. With lyrical language and storytelling prowess, Bragg brings the reader to an understanding of what made this flawed man so special. "As far as just the sheer joy of telling a story, I never had more fun than I did with *Ava's Man*," he says.

*All Over but the Shoutin'* tells the darker story of his childhood in Jacksonville, Ala., with an absent alcoholic father, a strong, determined mother and his own struggles. Some of it is so raw that the words sting. In one segment he recalls his high school girlfriend breaking up with him because "we were too different...because I was poor and she was not." Coming to terms with himself and his humble beginnings is a theme in his memoir.

Bragg dropped out of college his first year at Jacksonville State University, but not before he learned from his feature-writing instructor, Mamie B. Herb, that he had "talent and promise." He was recruited from the college newspaper, where he was a sportswriter, by the Jacksonville News. By the time he was 20, he was working full time for the *Anniston Star*, which he describes as the "best small newspaper in Alabama and one of the best in the country." He later moved to *The Birmingham News*, the biggest newspaper in Alabama, where he wrote front-page stories that led to jobs at the *St. Petersburg [Fla.] Times* and then the *Los Angeles Times*. Based in New Orleans, he now is a national correspondent for *The New York Times*.

As he followed this path, he writes, "the chip I had carried on my shoulder for a lifetime grew...to the size of a concrete block." just when he thought he had dropped this heavy load, it turned up again. In his memoir, Bragg writes about an incident that occurred when he was at Harvard on a Nieman Fellowship for journalists. "I let my temper push through my paper-thin veneer of respectability...during a white-tablecloth dinner at the Harvard Faculty Club, sometime between the chateaubriand and the stirring speech by a Native American newspaper publisher."

Bragg had gotten into what he thought was a friendly argument with a fellow diner, an intellectual, until the diner took a swipe at Bragg's reasoning by saying, "You embarrass yourself." "I'll tell you what," Bragg said. "I'll drag you out of here and whip your ass." The silence that followed was unbearable. "I felt like I had dragged my sleeve through the peach cobbler or committed some other terrible faux pas," Bragg writes.

The Harvard story is more than an example of self-deprecating humor. Throughout his memoir, Bragg lays out his vulnerabilities along with his accomplishments. A reporter who had won many awards and would one day go on to win journalism's top prize, Bragg writes that he wondered if he was "as good, as smart, as clean as the people around me. Now this, this insult, hurt like salt flung in my eyes."



## Interview with Rick Bragg (2)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Writing about his own life was difficult, Bragg says; but writing about his maternal grandfather was a joy. For himself and his readers, Bragg brings Charlie Bundrum, who died before his grandson was born, to life. When Bragg was growing up, Bundrum was a mysterious figure, because no one in his family of two sons and five daughters would talk about him. "Talking about his life always led to thinking of his death, to a feeling like running your fingers through saw briars—and what good did that do?" But slowly he got his mother, aunts, uncles and family friends to tell their Charlie stories. The result is a big-hearted portrait of a man who worked hard, sometimes drank too much and got into fights but remained a hero to his family and community. Bragg's masterful use of descriptive details and colorful stories gives the reader a sense of what it was like to know Bundrum. Reading his passage about his grandfather's funeral, it's hard to believe that Bragg wasn't an eyewitness.

"Charlie Bundrum took giant steps in run-down boots. He grew up in hateful poverty, fought it all his life and died with nothing except a family that worshiped him and a name that gleams like new money. When he died, mourners packed Tredegar Congregational Holiness Church. Men in overalls and oil-stained jumpers and women with hands stung red from picking okra sat by men in dry-cleaned suits and women in dresses bought on Peachtree Street...even the preacher cried."

Writing about family is harder than writing about strangers, says Bragg, who has tackled more than his share of difficult assignments. In the introduction to an anthology of his feature stories, *Somebody Told Me*, he says he has written about everything from "bloody coups in Haiti to bloody courtyards in New Orleans, from soldiers in the Persian Gulf, waiting to risk their lives, to eighty-year-old prison inmates in Alabama, just waiting to die." No matter what the subject is, he gives it a human face.

Bragg says he learned storytelling "at the knees of some of the best storytellers—back-porch talkers." His writing simmers with down-home phrases: "His temper was as hot as bird's blood." "His daddy was just a name, but his momma was a bird flying." He thickens it with detail. Picnics on the grounds of the Protestant church are "where people sat on the springtime grass and ate potato salad and sipped sweet tea from an aluminum tub with a huge block of ice floating in it." He pulls you into his Alabama world where "... the foothills were not black, white or gray. They were loud, and green, and often splashed with red, and smelled of manure and honey, and hot biscuit dough."

Writing may have taken Bragg out of poverty, but it's the working folks he still likes to write about the most. "Every life deserves a certain amount of dignity, no matter how poor or damaged the shell that carries it," he writes in *All Over but the Shoutin'*. During our interview, he talked about his desire to honor his family and to tell their story straight and true. His mother calls that "telling God's sanction."

Bragg receives two or three calls and dozens of e-mails a day from readers who were inspired by his books to interview their parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins and start writing down their own family stories.

"I wrote the book about my mom because I wanted to honor her. I wrote the book about my grandfather because I didn't know him, and I wanted to build myself a grandfather. To have it embraced in a broader sense is really great," he says. "Down here in Louisiana we call it lagniappe, a little something extra."



## Interview with Rick Bragg (3)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Why was writing about your family so important to you?

I made it a point in the introduction of *All Over but the Shoutin'* to say what momma had done was what a lot of mommas had done. They sacrifice for their children, they drag those cotton sacks over a million miles of dirt. A lot of mommas do that. It might be a metaphorical cotton field; it might be diners where they wash dishes or wait on tables all day. Or they might take in laundry. I don't want anyone to think I thought we were anything special in that regard, but I did want to honor her for that.

What happened was that the book became this anthem not just for working people, but people who, if you scratched underneath the surface of their lives, would be just one generation removed from someone who had worked with their hands.

*Ava's Man* honored a man who worked hard for a living, a flawed, sometimes boozy man; but it honored him for the fact that for all the years he raised those children, he never once missed a day of work.

What advice do you give the people who call and want to write about their families? How can they keep their stories interesting?

I tell people to tell the stories the way they heard them told. It's hard to scratch a culture and not find a storyteller somewhere in it. Tell it with the flavor, the drama, the grace and the wit that it's told to you. People say [my] language is so beautiful. Well, the language was stolen. I stole it from my people. It was their rhythms, their cadences, their beautiful communications that came through. I have some skill at it, but the truth is, I had it at hand.

How did you finally get your family to talk about your grandfather?

For *Ava's Man* I would just ask my aunts: "What happened that day?" They would tell stories the way they tell stories. Then they would get three-quarters of the way through the story, right to the good part, and one or another aunt would jump in and take it down a completely irrelevant trail. I would have to patiently, so patiently guide them back to the point. It would take forever, but I can't say I wasted one second of time, because often the trail they would go down would be information I did not have. I just let them talk. They would start talking about a dog and they'd be saying, "Daddy got the gun and pointed at the dog." Then one of them would say, "You know I think we had a dog like that." Right at the most dramatic moment, you're talking about an irrelevant dog that is not involved with the story and doesn't have anything to do with anything.

In families, each individual often has his or her own point of view concerning the same events. How did you verify elements of the stories they told?

You try to do the very best you can. There aren't any public records of any of this stuff. What you do is you talk to everybody you can and get each one to tell the same story. The most efficient way is one-on-one, but understand something, the best way to avoid [confusion] is to get them all in one place. I'm not saying the consensus is more accurate than one person's story, but it's at least the best you can do. That's one of the problems of doing memoirs about blue-collar people. If you do a biography of Howard Taft or Lyndon B. Johnson, you've got evidence of their places on the planet. As I said in the first book, we didn't make the "historical registers" unless we knocked some rich man off his horse.

When you are ready to write, how do you sort through and organize all the material that you have gathered? Organization is the hardest thing. I probably had a thousand pages of fairly orderly notes. By that I mean they filled big notebooks. They had dates and even some drawings. But I must have had another thousand scraps of paper—little bitty scraps of information that were just as valuable as the orderly story. I would come across somebody and didn't have anything to write on but a stub of an airline ticket. It was a logistical nightmare getting it all together.





## Interview with Rick Bragg (4)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

I didn't tape-record my people, because I knew the tape recorder would turn them off. I never really like to use a tape recorder. I use a notebook. Most of my stories don't lend themselves to a long narrative. You start *Ava's Man* with the story of your grandmother, Ava, beating up Blackie Lee, a woman who had designs on Charlie. It's comical, but also shows your grandparents' flaws.

Why did you decide to start with that particular episode?

The Jackie Lee chapter was very important to me and to the story. I wanted to begin with a personal story. Frankly, I also wanted to begin with a story that would paint a picture of their relationship. I wanted people to see early that Ava was not a meek and timid person, and that Charlie was not perfect. He was not a pious man who carried a Bible in one hand and went out and did good deeds. I spent many chapters showing his good deeds and his heroism, but he could be flawed. I wanted to show that in the first chapter. Of all the stories they told me, it was the one I could most see in my mind's eye. If you have a grand story that kind of sums things up—that would be your lead. It's just like newspaper writing. As a mechanical thing, it's just the right thing to do. Tell a great little story, get people's attention, make them stand up and take notice, then you can go with the pure chronology. In *All Over but the Shoutin'*, it was the same way. I talked about my daddy in the first couple of chapters. You can paint that bright hot, strong, sweet, sad picture; then readers will care about your people. The introduction and the first chapter or two can do that for you.

What do you try to get across in your books' prologues?

I like a long introduction because it tells people what they are going to get, and you're not selling anybody a bill of goods. A long introduction helps you get the book straight in your mind and lets you be really personal. The introduction is your chance to tell people why you wrote the book and why it was important to you. You can tell how much you love your people without feeling self-conscious about it. It's the place where you can have this bone-naked love and then the narrative can even be a little stark as the book goes on because you've explained it. You've said, "I wrote about these people because I love them and this will show you how I love them and why I love them."

Did you ever get blocked while writing?

I pretty much flew through *Ava's Man* in that it was written in about a year. I got to the section where my grandfather has to die. It was like running into a wall. I just stood and looked at the wall. There was sadness in it I had not expected. I knew I would love my grandfather, because my aunts, whom I love very much, loved him, but I didn't expect there to be real pain. From being this picturesque figure to being family to being somebody I really had breathed life into—to have to kill him...I could have ended the book with him still alive. I could have ended the book with the sad and sweet story of the last few days of his life. If I could change anything at all in it, I might not do that. But there was so much story to tell and life to be lived that needed to be talked about after his death. I had to do it. It took me between two months and four months, but once that chapter was done, I was able to move on.

You've said that you wrote *All Over but the Shoutin'* in honor of your mother. What did it mean in terms of writing about yourself? How did you know how much to leave in and take out?

Writing is so subjective. I'm sure some people think [the memoir] was self-indulgent, but I think if it really had been self-indulgent, it would have never gotten the critical praise that it received. People said, "Wasn't that a difficult book to write?"

It should have been a lot easier because it was plucked from memory, but it was not. It was more personal and it was sadder. *Ava's Man* doesn't have the unrelenting sadness. It was more fun. The other one was more bitter, angry and personal.



## Interview with Rick Bragg (5)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

Could you have written *Ava's Man* if you had not written *All Over but the Shoutin'*?

I don't think I would have enjoyed it so much. One reason I wrote *Ava's Man* was so many people who read *All Over but the Shoutin'* wanted to know where my momma came from. Where do people get that much character and backbone? They knew it was from her daddy and momma. My momma always said she wished she had her daddy's strength of character, and she does. She just has a meeker way of presenting it to the world.

How did your experience as a reporter help you write?

Every word I ever wrote for every newspaper I worked for made me a better writer, gave me discipline and experience. Having discipline and experience is an advantage. I've written a lot about great sadness—bombings, violence in housing projects, and murder cases. It teaches you how to write about pain and suffering without being maudlin. That helped me a great deal in writing *All Over but the Shoutin'*. Just doing it, just getting to write everyday or every week, just writing and meeting deadlines helps.

How did you begin your journalism career?

I lucked into it. I was on the high school newspaper staff. I was only in college for about six months and was on the college newspaper staff. That turned into a little job at a local weekly paper for \$50 a week. I went from the weekly to a daily, from a small daily to another small daily to a mid-size daily, and mid-size daily to the *St. Petersburg Times* to the *Los Angeles Times*, where I was only briefly employed, to *The New York Times*. I've really served at all stations of the cross. I've been pretty much everywhere. I don't think there's a difference between writing for a newspaper or magazine and doing a chapter in a book. People who think there is something pedestrian about journalism are just ignorant. The best writers who have put pen to paper have often had a journalism background. There are these boutique writers out there who think if they are not writing their novels sitting at a bistro with their laptops, then they're not real writers. That's ridiculous.

How do you find time to write books while you are traveling all over the world on assignments?

I steal time to write at the same computer I do my newspaper stories on. When I can, I write at night, write on weekends. When I have a couple weeks off, I use it to write. I have not had a vacation for seven years. I have been using that time to write books. For instance, I'll take my vacation time this fall and do the paperback book tour. I'll steal a little extra time if I can. Publicizing the books is just as time-consuming as writing them. I have to do it. I owe that to the publisher.

What's the tour experience like?

You get to meet and talk to the people who read your book, and if you don't enjoy it, there is something wrong with you. I don't mind the tour. I travel for a living anyway. If I travel for the paper, that means I fly to a city I've probably never been to, get off a plane, rent a car, drive out in bumper-to-bumper traffic heading for a little town that nobody knows the name of and can't give me directions to, and it's not on the map. When I get there. I try to get information in 15 minutes for a story I have to write in 45. I try to find a quiet place, or at least a place to sit down with my laptop. Then I have to find a working phone. I write until deadline and spend another hour haggling with the editor, and then go eat fast food. Not all the time, but often, I go back and go to sleep way too late. If you are on a book tour, you fly somewhere, somebody picks you up holding a copy of your book, so you know at least one copy sold, and drives you to the talk. You talk to people who loved your book or at least came. Then somebody takes you to the hotel, and you go to sleep in a good bed. You wake up the next morning and do it all over again. Hell, that's easy.

What other writers have helped or influenced your writing?

I've had some people take a personal interest in my writing—Willie Morris, the great Mississippi writer. Pat Conroy has been very kind to me. Stephen King...because when I was a kid, I just ate up his phrases.



## Interview with Rick Bragg (6)

## Spotlight on: *All Over but the Shoutin'*

I've continued to read him all these years. Some of the things he wrote were just so descriptive and so beautiful. Larry McMurtry writes about friendship and makes you care about people, makes you care if they live or die. Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* is one of my favorite books. I read a lot of Southern writers—Faulkner, Eudora Welty—and a lot of Dickens. It seems I stole something from everybody I ever read. I hope in a good way.

What has your relationship with editors been like?

I was lucky. The first editor I had was Linda Healey [at Pantheon Books] for *All Over but the Shoutin'*. I couldn't afford a [second] draft. I barely had the time to do the book as it was. We went over it chapter by chapter. She and I did a lot of pre-emptive editing. Every day we'd talk about a chapter.

At Knopf it was Jordan Pavlin. Jordan and I have such a good relationship. I can kind of guess what she's going to say before she says it and vice versa. Much of the editing she did on *Ava's Man* was in saying something like "I think we made that point." She made it leaner. There were a lot of dangling participles. I'm not talking about the real dangling participles, but places where she just made it more pointed and more effective. I've never had an editor in the book business who didn't make it better.

It sounds like you spend your waking moments either getting ready to write or writing. What motivates you? The truth is I wrote at first because it was the skill that I had and got paid for it. I love doing it, and I get to see a lot of interesting things. It went from being a means of survival to being a real delight. I love to tell a story. That's at the heart of it. I have a real joy in doing a pretty newspaper story, but doing the books—there's real love in it.

### The Rick Bragg File:

- Rick Bragg was born in Piedmont, Ala., in 1959 and often writes about his Southern roots, "The South I was born in was eulogized by pay-as-you-pray TV preachers, enclosed in a coffin of light blue aluminum siding and laid to rest in a polyester suit from Wal-Mart," he writes in his memoir *All Over but the Shoutin'*.
- He began his journalism career as a sportswriter for the *Jacksonville News* in Alabama. In a JB Online interview, he said of those days: "I got to sit in a room with Paul 'Bear' Bryant and listen to him mumble. I got to talk to Richard Petty, the Allison Brothers and Buddy Baker. These weren't the kind of athletes who spoke through their sports agents. These were characters, individuals. The differences between them and sports figures today are unbridgeable."
- His journalism jobs have included working on the state desk at the *Anniston [Ala.] Star* and as the Miami bureau chief for the *St. Petersburg [Fla.] Times*. Bragg's feature writing includes stories about George Wallace's apology to civil rights marchers 30 years after the Selma-to-Montgomery march; the Oklahoma City bombing; the Susan Smith trial; the Elian Gonzalez conflict; schoolyard killings in Jonesboro, Ark.; gun fights in New York bodegas; and bloody uprisings in Haiti.
- He won the American Society of Newspaper Editors Distinguished Writing Award twice and the Pulitzer Prize in 1996.
- Bragg on journalism, from the *Harvard Gazette*: "We have a greater responsibility than ever not to let these things that are so important that we write about fade, bleach, lose their flesh and blood. A million mute statistics won't make anybody cry, but you paint them a picture and you can [make people cry]." Abbe, Elfrieda